THE BUDDED BRANCH

by

ROBERT NICHOLS

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THE BUDDED BRANCH

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By ROBERT NICHOLS

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PREFATORY NOTE

The majority of the poems here printed will not be reprinted. They are gathered together for two reasons:

Because the book affords an opportunity to record appeals which are—save in one or two cases—to scarcely tangible emotions : those emotions which float across the mind like Coleridge's cloud

'*Thin and pale and very high*'

and are of import to the very few.

And because these poems form some slight memorial of an intimacy with Nature which War has destroyed since I now see Nature as the Great Indifferent.

R. M. B. N.

Bray.
April 1918.

I DEDICATE THESE POEMS TO

NORAH DENNY

Change is the law. Who changes not is dead.
Our loves must range, our roses change at last.
New roses find I for old roses shed.
'Love well your rose' that rule alone hold fast
For now comes change : all that I had thou hast.

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PERSEPHONE

A FANTASY IN VERSE FOR ORCHESTRA
With Singers and Chorus to be mimed upon the Stage : the Whole forming a Poem with Music
SYMBOLISING AUTUMN

PERSEPHONE A FANTASY IN VERSE

Softening of murmurous music. The curtain rises. A pallid vale of flowers, barred by wide flat masses of shadow and backed by a conventionalised pattern of tree trunks. A faint cold mistiness hangs over everything, and the flowers, formerly roseate, seem to have been blanched to their present pallidity. The wandering music of a maidens' chorus echoes and dies away.

PERSEPHONE *(with music)*

I have taken in my hands a flower
And to my eyes rush tears:
Beauty painfully perfected through dark years
To last but an hour!
Looking upon thee I see my own grey eyes
And gentle face and bending body slim;
Persephone, why hast thou this disguise
When as a vapour over the sun a dim
Foreboding—sunny water feeling the tinge of frost
In a dark wind—
Halts my heart and my feet turn stumbling and lost,
Eyes being smit suddenly blind
As I pass from sunlight to shadow?

Swell of music; then emerging fluidly and clearly the voices of the CHORUS OF MAIDENS *(going).*

There are many flowers in the meadow
And comely feet
Tread through them pressing the blossoms down;
I meet
His face and my own
Looking up in dreams, from the grass . . .
The flowers nod together. What do they speak
Sorrowful words or fair
With their mournful eyes what do they seek
To glisten on me?
Is it love or despair—
All beautiful things fading so quickly?
Or simple bidding to bind them upon my head?
Alas!
Should I twine the sun soon had turned them sickly.
And what would he say seeing me cirqued by the dead?
He would look upon me with dawning amaze
And fend his eyes from the ill-promising sight—
Till the tear in my eyes glinted, a star in a haze,
As I lay awake
Alone
The long, and the starry night.
Yet simple flowers speak simply to me and bid me gird

My breasts with a criss-cross
Of the frank beauty of the field
Promising not to fade till he has spoken the low-lipped word
And to my beauty, unheeding its loss,
He yield.

PERSEPHONE *(softly)*

I am the dangling leaf of an autumn tree
Shake its branches and I shall fall.
Love going by has not regarded me.
Perhaps he cried; but I have not heard his call.
And I am lone; a white bird in the wood,
A statue in the dusk,
A coral fallen from the gleaner's snood
That lies hidden among the stubble and husk

Diminuendo of plaintive music, a muffled cymbal, leaves flicker slowly off the trees and eddy down about the girl, Pluto rising shadowy from the ground at her feet, crouching, half-kneeling, looking up at the girl's face.

PLUTO

The tired eyes are a pool
Whereon only the wind steers
Ruffling the shining ache under skies vacant and cool.

They are full of tears,
That have not the will to fall.
If tenderly I speak she will fearfully hear
As she hears the voice of lorn flowers pallid and tall.

Pluto gently rises and, leaning forward, looks long into her eyes.

PERSEPHONE *(suddenly)*

Aghast! Ah, what wind was that from the mountains
Chill from blue snow
From under the ominous pines, the stiffened fountains
Numbed on my face like a blow?

Pause; subdued laughter of wind-harried leaves.

An unknown wind was that, from the fountains,
Which no more flow,
But stonied by grief sunnily glisten
And drop slow, so slow
Tears over snow-vapoured chasms that listen
Silent below.

Pause; the trees are heard dryly tossing; a greater paleness seems to come on all things: (*more wildly*)

An icy wind stoops from the cloud that towers
White, chill as snow

And, darkling ruffles the fluttering flowers
Which bend and blow.
And over my head I hear a wuther of wings;—
It is the purple pigeons flying.
I felt pass over me their shadow;—
Before the wind with whickering wings
Smiting the harriëd air they go.

(slower)

Daylight is darkling dying.
The chill air rings
To a repeated and lonely crying

(frantic)

The wind is wailing and the woods are sighing,
The light is paleing and the flowers are dying!
I too must go
I that return not with returning springs.

Chorus of Winds (*unseen, aërial and flute-like*)

Whither O brothers and whither O sisters
Lyre-noted springs?
Shall we to the sky?
O no. Alas, no!
Bitterly we must blow
And ye hang tinkling from shelvéd snow
While on you the rainbow sunlight glisters.

Persephone

No more over the flowers wandering, wondering
At their starry mood
Must we, but sweep thundering
Through the leafless wood,
Beyond cloud mountains to echo
In blue ice canyons to brood.

Not till the spring
Shall ye follow her steps and flow
Through meadows through meads,
Shall our folk sing
Delight in the sunshine on swards that glow,
While among your reeds
Ye too to their summery whispering
Make maiden reply;
Then as we swoop with the swooping swallow
Shall we stoop from the sky
Following spring whom all Musics follow.

The music of the wind, that seemed to have bent to the earth whirling the leaves before it, has ascended and now becomes more and more remote.

Sadly the sea of flowers froths pale
Under the threat of sparkling night
The gully darkens, the peak lights fail :
Let us wing together in darkling flight——

As the sounds die away Pluto pins the girl's arms to her sides. She does not appear to notice, but continues staring as if still listening. Occasional shudders shake her as the earth becomes overclouded and mysterious.

PERSEPHONE (*bursting out*)

The flowers are shrill,
And where are my companions gone?
A small single cloud oppresses the earth ashen and dumb.
I am alone and I am not alone——

Who touched me?
I am numb, all numb. . . .
O see the flowers are blackened, threshed and tossed
As by the passing of black winds and sere;
The streams are silent and I feel the frost
Of the last day of the year.

A rising spiral of blown leaves approaches her. Pluto puts his hands on her forehead and forces her head back.

Ah!—the last day for me. My throat is closed
In an icy grip. Terror surprise my eyes.
O dreadful and expected lover!

Pluto has kissed her, the leaves whirl from the trees; a tornado of leaves rises from the earth and in this Pluto and

Persephone are wrapped and disappear. The quivering honey coloured light of a late autumn afternoon strikes across the vale and falls upon the leaves, over which the chorus of maidens is seen approaching.

Chorus of Maidens

The day is over;
Evening has closed
With a sharp succession of swift sighs.

Surely the wind carried cries?
Go seek the princess. Form a pale procession
Under these waning skies.

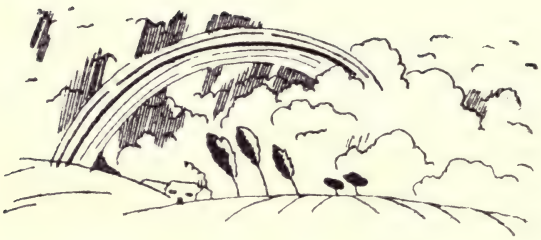
The honey coloured light dies. The forms of the maidens are seen melting into the trees. In the vague twilight a star begins coldly to glitter amid the trees. The music of the wind is heard very faint and distant. All turns grey and a faint powder of snow drifts by. The gaunt trees rattle suddenly in the growing darkness.

The Curtain Descends

THE POPLAR

O IMMENSE POPLAR, standing alone
In the midst of the broad sunny plain,
Lifting the green rustling height of your column
Into the clear deep sky,
Where before have I seen you? Of what are you emblem?

The leaves whisper confusedly.
What mean you tall poplar?
Lifting your lissom height to the blue of noonday,
Shaking your silver leaves in the sunny silence?



VISITATION

A SOFT RAIN descends upon the poplar trees;
I hear its tiny hiss ;
The leaves shake as the rain shakes in the breeze.
Here the Mystery is.

Speak! Speak to me now for now I can hear.
Upon my heart has fallen a bliss like rain ;
I shake in a sigh which rustles and draws more near:
Now the Mystery speaks or speaks to me never again.

It is passed. It was here. It was come.
It held me. O see in the sky
An immense rainbow expand on world wet, radiant and dumb !

The poplars hang still. A drift of rain has passed by.

THE SECRET GARDEN

THERE is somewhere a Secret Garden, which none hath seen,
In a place apart
But amid the bramble-bound world, the thicket, the screen
To the ununderstanding of heart.

There is somewhere a Secret Garden, where none hath been,
Where Night and Day
Commingle; where the sun and the starlight's sheen
Shines ever; where ever the moony fountains play
Lifting their lily-like throats, tossing their spray;
Whereover the rainbow meets red-hued serene;
Where the flame-dripping branches are brighter green;
Where the Gardener walks in His Garden unheard, unseen.

There is somewhere a Secret Garden: a door in a wall,
Opened: how shine within
Flower and fruit and torrent of blossoms which cannot fall!
Whence a jubilant din
Floats abroad of birds of scintillant feather
Swelling ecstatic throats in chorus together;
Or the cry of one, crying alone a sad and a silver call
Rings from the Secret Garden where none hath been.

The Secret Garden

There everlastingly the Gardener walks
Unseen, unmarked, unheard
Save as He goes
Humbled and hushed and happy falls each bird,
Each fountain throws
Gentlier upward, changing from blue to rose,
And there is seen
Glimpse of a radiant robe, a darkling mien
'Twixt the sheeted light and the sparkling drift where it blows.

There the flowërs wait,
Abasing each noble head,
Till He draw nigh,
Then exalt their lovely faces to Him, rose little, rose great,
Flowers of pale and flowers of passionate dye,
Under His eye
Till softly He lift a hand and the hand is spread
Blessing their beauty, their peace with a word like a sigh.

There is somewhere a Secret Garden, where none hath been,
Or, glimpsed, lost to his grief,
There would I bide, though I ever abode unseen :
A snail or a stone under the lowliest leat.

THE CONSUMMATION

THERE IS A PIGEON in the apple-tree
And when he moves the petals fall in showers
And O how low, how slow, how rapturously
He croons and croons again among the flowers!

Above the boughs a solemn cloud-bank climbs,
White, pure white, dazzling, a shield of light;
Speck on its space, a lark, whose quick song chimes
With each brief shake of wings, vaults t'ward the height.

Below, a beetle on a stook of grass
Slowly unharnesses his shuttered wings,
His tiny rainbow wings of shrivelled glass.
He leaps! He whirrs away. The grass blade swings.

Faint breezes through the branches wind and call.
It is the hour. This perfect hour is His,
Who stooping through the depth, quiet, joy of all
Prints on my upturned face a silent kiss.

SONG AND SILENCE

I WALK : the skies are glassed and chill ;
Silence pervades dark copse and hill
The fields are sombre, vacant, still.

Why plainest, thou, that for so long
No fount or fire-like blast of song
Has burst thy heart or ta'en thy tongue ?

Plain not. The fire sleeps underground ;
The fount in moaning vaults profound
And in silence sleeps all sound.

PRAYER

IT SEEMS I TASTE my likely doom
Since, for so long, I am become
A thing that drives dull, blind and dumb.

What now if in my being's core
The fountains freeze, if the fire's ore
Dies under ash for evermore ?

O lifeless fount ! O fireless night,
Hopeless oblivion sans respite !
Have mercy, Lord, if such my plight !

Hold, hold me fast,—for in my grief,
Like to a cataract's whirlëd leaf
My way to Hell indeed were brief !

IN THE COTSWOLDS

A SPRAWL HERE in the meadow
Among simmering grass
I feel sunlight and shadow
Over my body pass.

Beside me flame four beeches,
Below by the stream-side
A tressy willow reaches
Over the water-glide.

In the Cotswolds

I hear sweet birds, swift water
Rushing under the mill,
Handclaps and childish laughter
Flung up over the hill.

O all this beauty never
Fails me! I know no dearth.
How can I steel me ever
To leave this happy earth?

Yet—could I bear me worthy
Of this His other dust—
God would not part the earthy
Wholly from earth I trust.

Come I to pass to heaven
What sights these eyes shall see!
Trees that are fairer even
Than beech or willow tree;

I shall hear subtler water
Goldener songs of birds
And the Children of Heaven's laughter
And all their lovely words;

I shall dance and sing with them,
Merry, innocent, wise,
In my mouth laughter and anthem
Tears in my happy eyes!

SONNET : LATE FEBRUARY

A DULL DAY : the bare elms beside the pool
Stand gloomily waiting, bleak, and dull and still.
Spring draws not nigh us yet. The air is cool,
Jaded and grey. Only below the mill
The waters roar subduedly. I am alone.
Silver and black the pool shines, the great boughs
Over it massively hang and suddenly groan
As though in weariness. A moor-hen ploughs
Her scuttering wedge across the surface sheen
And all is still again. O Spring, loved Spring,
Return ! Shine out wild sun ! Blithe winds blow keen
And strike from us the clustered hours that cling
Weighty with solitude and the loaded sting
Of all th 'irremediable Has-been !

SPLEEN

I WALK ALONE, in the garden,
Black, upright, arisen dead ;
Each unmemoried step seems hour-long ;
I walk. I raise my head.

The wet, the white, fragile roses
All shiver as though in fear :
Each pure face is pleading, is humble ;
Each heart enshrines a tear.

They are still ; they wait ; they watch me.
O terror ! I turn. I groan.
Blind faces of meekness and wisdom
My God ! To strike them down !

TULIPS

SET IN A BRONZEN BOWL, behold
Red tulips and tulips of ragged gold.

They stand like angels in the gloom
Of my retired, dusk, chilly room.

Seven days, seven nights I had been
Sunk into such sloth as is named sin.

There were no tulips in the room
Only the Dragon in the gloom

Watched while upon my lonely bed
I lay and turned and wished me dead.

For he was Doubt and in his eyes
I read that all I loved was lies :

Art but a trick learned in the schools
And Beauty but the lure of fools.

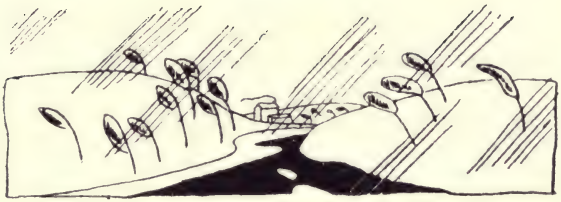
Till vacant I, at length, arose
And stumbled out what for God knows!

When in a court beneath a flare
Of gas I saw them standing there

And for six pennies made them mine:
Fire of the heavens, seraphim divine.

I set them up and there they shone.
They challenged the Dragon and he was gone.

Seven bright tulips, only seven:
Not flowers but Angels! Warriors of Heaven!



THE VISITOR

OVER THE SAD, the piteous, rutted plain
Drifts and drifts the long rain,

And, perhaps,
Comes and taps and looks in and taps again on the pane
Like a poor thing gone mad.
Rain complains—Time has taken the hope Rain once had—
'Speak to me, man,' Rain says 'I am sad, so sad ;
There is nothing but pain ;
Speak to me, to old Rain ' Rain says
Are n't you, too, sad ?'

'Aye, Rain, Old Boy, I am sad, a long time sad ;
Young too, many years remain
And I must finish them all who have never been glad,
I, who know very well too what each will contain.
Pity me Rain, Old Rain,—
I shall never go mad

But shall sit here listening, enduring, sad, sad and quite
sane,
Chained so I cannot go where I would :
So pity me, I pity you
Rain.'

Thus all day long I sit while Rain
And I pity each other—
Poor two.

WINSLOW

TODAY, I THINK, at Winslow
The breeze moves up the hill,
The shiny grasses ripple
While all above hangs still
And, lost in sun and silence, the gay lark sings his fill.

Today I think, at Winslow
The feet of one I know,
Priestess of Sun and Silence,
Toward the hill-top go
Moving like thought to music processional and slow.

There through the flawless noontide
She lies, in Calmness caught,
Watching wide-eyed the heavens
Or following the thought
Which each soft sound or silence has to her senses brought.

Winslow

Would I were now at Winslow,
That by her down I lay,
To watch the deepening heavens,
To hear the breezes play,
To share her Peace—in silence and sunlight all the day.

RECOLLECTION

LAST TIME I LOVED YOU—how I know
the place !—
There was a grey house on a listening hill
Which darkened slowly, ringed by woods, whence trill
On trill of evening birds broke out as pace by pace
Down the long lanes of beeches bowering gold
We lingered meshed in a tunnel of fire
And from your eyes the tears fell bright and cold !
We knew there was no end to our desire.

How still the pools were, green and grey and green
Glimmering in the twilight. One by one
Out of the blue sky limpid and serene
The yellow leaves spun downward, turning dun,
To light on some still, patterning water-lily leaf
Whose maiden blossoms in a silver host
Motionless waited all the autumn eve
The lover dragon-fly, a flitting ghost.

Recollection

Upon the leaf-strewn water's marble edge
Slept a young Cupid curled about an urn
Half hidden in a bed of faded sedge
And never saw the sombre water burn
At dawn and even when the brooding sun
Stared in the spidery branches of the trees.
Cupid slept. What he had done he had done,
And now all cruel-careless drowsed at ease.

Softly we would approach him. And you laid
On him one slim, sad hand the colour of pearls
And suddenly I saw you shrink, afraid,
Feeling him sigh and shake his stony curls.
Then on we passed, softly upon the tip
Of toes over strewn beech husks, crackling under foot,
And often you turned, hushed finger upon lip
For silence lest he hear and rise and shoot.

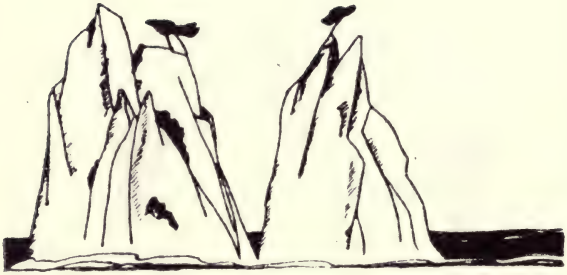
For love was bitter to us and O sweet
Even as it is now and it must be
When we have worn this life and again greet
Beyond what land ? Behind what ultimate sea ?
By day ? Or when the luminous moon among the mist
Clears slowly to a round of sterile fire
And passion waxes and the lips new kissed
Seal once again our bond of vain desire ?

THE LONG ROAD

TO A GAY TUNE in the morning,
Blithe enough, I stepped along :
All the bird-notes, the day's brightness
Spun themselves into my song.

Ere the noontide comes I find me
Plodding yet, though flag my feet
And so heavy now my heart is
Nor new songs nor old sound sweet.

Thus far trudged upon my journey,
More and more I mark my plight ;
Songless, heartless, dull and dusty
Why prolong the road to Night ?



SOUL AND SONG

SEE THE LARK LEAP
Scattering dew. One vault!
Singing he takes the steep
Nor to sing need halt.

O laden heart
Which would to the height
So speed, with what ill art
Thou takest thy flight.

Stubborn thy will
That, despite weak wing,
Thine be the miracle
Both to climb and sing!

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